



Great Public Schools
for Every Child

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The Honorable Charles Rangel
Chair, Committee on Ways and Means
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Rangel:

As a follow-up to my October 29 testimony on "Economic Recovery and Job Creation Through Investment," I am pleased to submit the following supplementary information:

- **Surveys on school environment and the impact on student achievement.** As I indicated in my oral testimony (referenced on page 120 of hearing transcript), NEA has conducted a number of surveys about the impact of teaching and learning conditions on student learning. The results of these surveys clearly show a link between quality learning environments and student achievement. Attached for your information is a brief summary of NEA's Teaching, Learning and Leading Survey (TELLS) as well as a list of additional references.
- **Link between school air quality and absenteeism.** In my oral statement (page 134 of hearing transcript), I discussed the relationship between school air quality and student learning. Asthma has reached epidemic proportions in the U.S. Nearly one in 13 school-aged children has asthma, and the percentage of children with asthma is rising more rapidly in preschool children than any other age group. Asthma is the leading cause of school absenteeism due to a chronic illness, accounting for over 14 million missed days per year (<http://www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/managingasthma.html#The%20Asthma%20Epidemic>).

The Environmental Protection Agency commissioned a National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine expert panel review of the scientific evidence on the relationships between indoor air pollution and asthma. The landmark report, *Clearing the Air: Asthma and Indoor Exposures*, released in 2000, guides much of the national effort to improve environments through various EPA programs.

Additional information on the link between asthma and indoor environments as well as the impact of indoor air quality on student performance is available at <http://www.epa.gov/asthma/science.html> and <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/118785730/abstract>.

I would be happy to provide any additional information needed by the Committee. Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony on these important issues.

Sincerely,

Dennis Van Roekel
President

Teaching, Learning and Leading Survey (TELLS)

Since 2005, the National Education Association has partnered with the New Teacher Center, University of California Santa Cruz (NTC) to support the work on conducting statewide teacher working conditions surveys. Based on the work started in 2001 in North Carolina, the Teaching, Learning and Leading Survey (TELLS) process has been successful in providing data that can inform substantive school improvement, teacher recruitment and retention concerns, legislative and political programs, as well as provide the voice of teachers into school reform. TELLs results provide individual districts and schools with reliable data regarding their own teachers' perspective on their working conditions and the impact of these conditions on student achievement. The data allows individual schools and communities to consider appropriate policies and programs to address the unique concerns of their teaching force. Data gathered from the tens of thousands of surveys representing more than ten states and/or large school districts has the potential to improve teacher working conditions in every school based on the voice that matters most—classroom teachers. Consequently, the initiative holds the promise to dramatically stem teacher attrition and significantly improve student learning results.

Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers have long realized that teaching quality is the most important variable for the success of students (Hanushek, Rivkin & Kain, 1998; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Supportive school environments, where educators are valued, trusted, and have the time and ability to collaborate to improve instruction, are necessary to enable teachers to be successful. Policymakers have paid little attention to the working conditions in schools (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007) that are so critical to teacher retention and teacher and student success. A growing body of research clearly demonstrates that assessing, understanding, and improving such conditions can have many benefits:

- ⊕ **Improved Student Learning:** Teachers' success with students is facilitated by a positive school context, such as support from leadership and being in a safe and collaborative working environment. Several statewide studies have demonstrated that the presence of positive work environments is significantly connected to increased student achievement (Hirsch & Emerick, 2007, 2006a, b). In particular, having strong, trusting relationships— both internally and externally—and supportive school leadership are both essential to improving student achievement.
- ⊕ **Improved Teacher Efficacy and Motivation:** Teachers' perceptions of their school are their reality; therefore, teachers' behavior and efficacy are a direct result of those views. In a recent literature review on teaching conditions, Leithwood (2006) found that teacher efficacy is significantly shaped by teaching conditions and that the degree of burnout and teacher engagement are critical to classroom performance and job satisfaction. He notes, "What teachers actually do in their schools and classrooms depends on how teachers perceive and respond to their working conditions." The TELLs surveys that have been conducted support this research.

Improved Teacher Retention: Teachers who leave schools cite an opportunity for a better teaching assignment, dissatisfaction with support from administrators and dissatisfaction with workplace conditions as the main reasons why they seek other opportunities (NCES, 2004, Marvel, et al., 2006). Teachers indicate that a positive, collaborative school climate and support from colleagues and administrators are the most important factors influencing whether they stay in a school (Hirsch & Emerick 2007, 2006a,b). Research has linked teachers' negative perceptions of working conditions with their exit from schools. Factors such as facilities, safety, and quality of leadership have a greater effect on teacher mobility than salary (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007). In particular, it appears that facilities that are safe coupled with supportive school leaders who create trusting environments where educators are engaged in decision making impacts the latter group's decisions about where to work (Hirsch & Emerick, 2007, 2006a,b).

New Recruitment Strategies to Entice Educators to Work in Hard-to-Staff Schools: Teachers who are willing to teach in hard-to-staff schools indicate that strong supportive school leadership, an engaged community and parents, safety, and working conditions are all important factors when selecting where to work. Further, when Alabama educators were asked about incentives that would attract them to schools, non-financial incentives, such as guaranteed planning time and reduced class sizes, were found to be more powerful recruitment incentives than salary supplements and bonuses (Hirsch, 2006c). Improving teaching conditions could also bolster the teacher supply pool because many educators who left due to poor conditions may come back if such conditions were enhanced. A survey of 2,000 educators from California found that 28 percent of teachers who left the profession before retirement indicated that they would come back if improvements were made to teaching and learning conditions. Monetary incentives were found to be less effective in luring them back (Futernick, 2007).

To help ensure that all students learn, teachers need to work in schools designed for their success. Positive teaching conditions and safe facilities, where educators feel supported and empowered, are essential to creating schools where teachers want to work and students can thrive.

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